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AN HOUR WITH PIERRE BOURGUET

*President of the National Council
of the Reformed Church of France*

by Daniel Walther



BLANC ET DEMILLY

Pastor Bourguet is a dynamic leader, energetic, well-informed, and humble. He reasons well and enounces his ideas clearly. As any French leader, he is eloquent, moving in public address, and convincing in debate. His small office contains mementos which all Huguenots cherish: above all, the Bibles. Here are old Bibles which have witnessed dramatic days of a long-oppressed people; and souvenirs of Aigues-Mortes with the Tower of Constance (a prison for Huguenot women), where Marie Durand was imprisoned as a teen-ager—for thirty-eight years. There are rare first editions of Calvin's writings, Huguenot emblems, medals, citations.

As Pastor Bourguet prepared to answer some questions on the present condition of Protestantism in France, I reflected on this remarkable religious minority which comprises some 900,000 Protestants, less than 2 percent of the population. It is a dynamic minority, conscious of its glorious past. There are two main groups: (a) The Reformed Church of France and the churches of Alsace-Lorraine, having a membership of about 450,000, and (b) the Evangelical Lutheran Church of France and the Church of the Confession of Augsburg in Alsace, with about 400,000 members. These four churches, and a few other denominations, make up the Protestant Federation of France, whose president is Charles Westphal.

In contrast to the relatively small segment of Protestants, about 80 percent of the French population are nominally Catholics. That is, they were baptized into that church. Eight percent of these observe Easter, Christmas, and All Saints Day. About 80 percent of the people desire a priest's assistance at death, and 50 percent are reported unwilling to have their children married outside the church. In all segments, even among nonreligious groups such as the communists, there is a certain adherence to the observance of "first Communion."

The Catholic Church reaches the working class to some extent, but no more successfully than other confessions. Those workers who "practice" religion do not exceed 10 percent. Some "good" parishes report as high as 25 percent of workers in attendance, but in densely populated areas the attendance is a mere 5 percent.

It is reported that in one Catholic parish in Paris, with

a workingmen's population of 62,000, only 296 people attend the Catholic church. I asked Pastor Bourguet about some of these matters.

Pastor Bourguet, what is the church doing about the working class in France?

Of late, efforts have been made to win the workingman. Priests, such as Abbé Boulier, have sometimes spoken at Marxist rallies. Many priests have become "workingmen's priests," associating with manual laborers in shops and construction work. Well-known Abbé Pierre did much for the poor. This priest was, for a time, a member of the French House of Representatives and has given to the poor the money he collected, which was considerable.

France is an agricultural country. Industries have not taken root there to the same extent as in England or Germany. The French farmer usually owns a small property, tills the soil well, and is quite conservative in methods and ideas.

There are about 20,000,000 French farmers. Among these about 8,000,000 are staunch churchgoing Catholics, and about 10,000,000 conform to the Catholic religion in that they attend the church during the great Christian feasts, especially Easter.

Canon Boulard thinks that the situation can be summed up by saying that large areas of the country are profoundly Christian. Other large segments slumber in semi-indifference, and there are a few zones near the large cities which have not been touched by the gospel. Although the French farmer clings to his Catholic tradition, he is seldom bigoted. It is in the rural areas that the spirit of independence is sometimes most acutely present.

What is the Protestant attitude?

From its inception Calvinism had a strong appeal to all classes of French society. Let us not forget that in France among the first "Lutherans" or "Biblians" there were wool carders as well as scholars. Leading families of nobility were also drawn into Huguenot ranks in the Reformation era. Protestants still number among their ranks some of the oldest aristocratic families. However, the Protestant church as an organization is not wealthy (since half of the mem-

bership are farmers): In the last resort, the gospel is mainly supported by the poor. The paying of tithe is not generally observed, but it is being increasingly encouraged. There seem to be neither funds nor interest for city evangelism, or new buildings, and Protestant churches are sometimes neglected and the clergy underpaid.

Is Protestantism spiritually active?

Like other Christians, Protestants have been affected at various times by philosophical trends and higher criticism. For example, Protestantism was especially vulnerable to the scientific inroads when humanitarian deism led them to see almost no limits to the possibility of reason. A restoration of religious feeling came in 1830 with the "awakening," somewhat influenced by Methodism. Since then, two main currents have been discernible: the French Orthodox Protestants who, under the leadership of eloquent Adolphe Monod, continue in the tradition of doctrinal conservatism; and the Liberals, attracted to high criticism. Their rationalism tended to a purely ethical religion. Among the Liberals there were distinguished men of learning, such as historians Taine and Michelet and philosophers such as Renouvier.

Revivalist movements have often appeared in France, especially in the south, the historic environment of the Huguenots. Although Protestantism has lost much of its Huguenot fervor, it still has dedicated pastors and scintillating orators. Warmth and eloquent fervor are the trademarks of past and present pulpit orators. Among Alsatian Protestants one remembers preacher-theologian Oberlin, Charles Wagner, and especially the contemporary Albert Schweitzer, whose prestige is enormous and universal.

Are there still Huguenots in existence?

"Huguenot" is a historic word, reaching back to the Reformation. No one has been able to explain when and how the word came into existence. It is a term referring sometimes to evangelical Christians, sometimes to a political party. As a movement, the Huguenots originated in the middle of the sixteenth century, when they were drawn into the turmoil of political and religious issues, and were influenced and directed by John Calvin.

The Huguenots of the sixteenth century attracted eminent men, such as Admiral Coligny, Sully, Antoine de Bourbon and his son Henry of Navarre, later King Henry IV of France. The Huguenots, with the influx of influential families, became a political faction aiming at the crown of France. In fact, they triumphed when their leader became king. After one hundred and fifty years of civil war and persecution, the Protestants were officially granted toleration in 1787.

What specific contributions are Protestants making today?

Protestants exercise a marked influence on the religious climate of France. The ministers speak the language of the people and place them in direct contact with the Word of God. It is true also that Protestants strongly influence the Catholic Church. You may have noticed in recent years that the Catholic liturgy in France has used new methods: greater simplicity in liturgy; central importance of the sermon; use of the French language; singing of hymns. The Bible has gained stature in their church. And much of that can be attributed to Protestant influence.

What has been the status of religious liberty in France since the French Revolution?

There is complete liberty, theoretically at least. Church and state were united, as you know, until the French Revolution in 1789. With the great revolutionary appeal the Catholic clergy were granted their own "civil" constitution. The extensive domains of the church were taken over by the state. Napoleon I instituted a new church-state relationship by the Concordat (1801). By it, Catholics and Protestants were recognized as state churches. This legislation lasted until 1905.

Since then we have had separation of church and state, and both confessions receive appropriations for their institutions such as libraries, young people's work, and the upkeep of historic churches. There is today no government interference in the activities of religious minorities. Any denomination may pursue its aims. One of the most cherished foundations of the French people is freedom. It is the first word of the revolutionary motto: "Liberty, equality, fraternity."

What have been the effects of Billy Graham's meetings in Paris?

Billy's Graham's first stay in Paris was very brief, but we welcomed him gladly. His contacts with the French were, therefore, somewhat hasty. In London and Scotland he stayed longer, preaching in the English language, while in France a translated message hampered the *elan* for which dynamic Graham is known. His approach of energetic evangelism did not meet with general understanding. Moreover, the Bible is still largely an unknown book in France. By and large, Frenchmen are rarely swept off their feet by this type of evangelism. If Billy Graham were to stay in France as long as he did elsewhere, the response might be different.

How strong is ecumenism among French Protestants?

While we have definite reservations as far as a close cooperation with Rome is concerned, we endorse wholeheartedly the Protestant Ecumenical Council; we are members of the World Council and foster any movement that strengthens the ties that bind all Protestants together.

Pastor Boegner is known as one of the foremost leaders in ecumenism. He has been conspicuously active in the great councils and has served several times as world president. He has expressed his ideas on ecumenism in his book, *Problem of Christian Unity*. However, even here the French refuse to follow unreservedly. Ecumenism is still, to some extent, in the talking stage. Moreover, it has been well said that "the popular segments of the churches are not yet in the movement, which is still too much confined to leaders and theologians."

What do you think is the greatest enemy of Christianity in France?

Indifference. That is Christianity's most insidious foe anywhere. Indifference is almost impossible to overcome. Lukewarmness is bad, but indifference is worse. It is the most challenging problem for us.

What should Protestants in France do to strengthen their position?

To some extent, French Protestants live on the capital of their great past. But we are very much alive. We are energetically at work and endeavor, like evangelicals elsewhere, to lift our vision by such projects as:

(1) Union of Protestant churches. The Reformed Church of France, for example, was reshaped in 1938, but it failed to take in all French Presbyterians. Furthermore, unity between Reformed and Lutheran proceeds but slowly.

(2) Evangelism. In spite of a lack of funds many efforts in this direction have been attempted; maybe not so much in cities. There have been itinerant evangelists like Exbrayat and De Robert, who are self-supporting (one is a cobbler).

(3) The Blue Cross. Under this sign antialcoholic endeavors are carried on. One important congress was organized in Madagascar. Conspicuous among the leaders is the Swiss writer Benjamin Valloton.

(4) Youth organizations. Encouragement of youth to participate in community projects. In order to keep our young people, we must give them something to do.

(5) Schools. There are three recognized Protestant theological seminaries in France: Montpellier in the south; Strassbourg, the mother of studies in Protestantism; and Paris. There are also several privately conducted schools which cling to Protestant traditions and beliefs.

(6) Missions. The most spectacular result of French Protestant vitality is that for the last one hundred and fifty years large sectors all over the world have been brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ by the gospel, and the number of Protestant French-speaking Christians is from ten to twenty times higher in Africa, the islands of the sea, and Madagascar than it is in metropolitan France. In fact, some of the evangelical Christians of the younger churches constitute the elite of the new independent states.

Pastor Bourguet, if you could address all Christian youth, what would be your theme?

I would speak on liberty. I would place the accent on freedom, which is, to the Christian, the most cherished climate. I would insist on the genuine, basic liberty (Continued on page 25)



TEST YOUR "WORD" POWER

by RICHARD H. UTT

Many kinds of birds and fowls, from the tiny sparrow to the great ostrich, have a part in Bible story, song, proverb, and prophecy. See how many of the following questions about Bible birds you can answer, selecting your answers from the list at the right.

1. A pair of _____ or _____ were offered when the infant Jesus was presented at the temple in Jerusalem.
2. Among the luxuries imported by King Solomon were _____.
3. God challenged Job to answer the question, "Doth the _____ fly by thy wisdom?"
4. Jesus said that Christians should not fear, for they "are of more value than many _____."
5. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "They that wait upon the Lord shall . . . mount up with wings as _____."
6. The psalmist drew an inspiring lesson from his observation of a _____ that had made "a nest for herself" in God's tabernacle.
7. The first creature to leave Noah's ark was a _____.
8. Christ likened His desire to protect and save the Jewish nation to the _____ that "gathereth her _____ under her wings."
9. After eating gluttonously a dinner of _____, many rebellious Israelites died.
10. A _____ reminded the disciple Peter that he was a coward and a traitor.

sparrows
eagles
peacocks
hawk
quail
cock
pigeons
chickens
turtledoves
hen
swallow
raven

(Answers on page 33)

the same outlook on religious matters. And lastly there should be discussion and agreement on the matter of children. If one party of the marriage does not desire to have children and the other does, there is bound to be future unhappiness. Talk these matters over thoroughly and you will avoid much future grief.

MAKING WRONGS RIGHT

QUESTION: When a person has gone from one to another telling false stories about me for years and is finally caught doing so, do you not think that these false stories should be repudiated and that this individual should ask me for forgiveness? Also, for the good of all, should not his confession be as public as was his offense, or is that expecting too much?

ANSWER: If the person who has repeated false stories about you were asking for counsel regarding how to make the situation right, I would be clear in counseling that he do what you have suggested. It would seem that if his repentance is sincere, he would by all means wish to do this. Such an action on his part must be voluntary and motivated by a sincere desire to make things right. However, even if this man never does what he should, I would earnestly urge that you forgive him anyway and treat him as a Christian brother. It may well be that this kind of treatment will do more to destroy any false stories about you than anything else you could do. By all means do not permit yourself to hold a grudge and thus prolong this unfortunate situation. It can harm you more than the other man.

WHERE IS HADES?

QUESTION: All the forty-seven years I have repeated the Apostles' Creed I have felt a chill run down my spine at the idea that Christ descended into Hades. How and why? I can no longer follow or accept this idea.

ANSWER: The idea that when Christ died He descended into Hades, or hell, probably stems from the verse of Scripture found in Acts 2:31: "He . . . spake of the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption." Misunderstanding of these words arises from the fact that so many people think of "hell" as a place of burning for the wicked. The word here translated "hell" comes from "Hades," a Greek word literally meaning "unseen," which is used to refer to the unseen world or the abode of the dead. It was commonly used to refer to the grave. The word "Hades" appears on many ancient tombstones in Asia Minor and is used to mean "the grave of" such and such a person. When you realize that "Hades" only means grave your problem disappears, for the text only teaches that Jesus went to the grave, from which He was raised on the third day.

NEVER HOPELESS

QUESTION: I am very much afraid that I have spurned the Holy Ghost too often. I'd like to come back to Christ, but I don't believe He'd take me, for I willfully have done wrong. I've tried to be a good Christian, but have only lasted for a few days at a time. Do you suppose it would be as well for me to forget everything and "get hung for a sheep as for a lamb"?

ANSWER: Every sincerely repentant individual comes to see the enormity of his sins, and as a result is assailed by feelings of despair. Even the apostle Paul talked about himself in these terms when he wrote, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." 1 Timothy 1:15. Paul, however, added this hopeful note: "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering." No matter how great our sins may be, God still loves us and freely offers us His forgiveness. In talking to a sinful and repentant woman, Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." John 8:11. Your situation is not hopeless. In fact, you are at the very place where God can do something for you. As you realize your need, give your life to Him again, and this time lean heavily upon Him to bring you the daily help and strength which you need. Remember that He loves you and wants to help you. If at any time you should slip and fall, do not despair, but, with God's help, pick yourself up again and press on.

PRAYER FOR HELP

QUESTION: May I ask you to pray for me? I have been bothered for years with the habit of swearing and I do not want to be like this anymore. Sometimes the old words begin to come from my lips, but I try to check myself. Saying things like this seems to be my first reaction to unpleasant situations. I get so depressed about this situation. Is it possible to live above this?

ANSWER: From what you write, I think you already are living above it. Through the help of the Lord, you apparently have been able to gain a degree of control over this unpleasant situation. Instead of becoming depressed, I think you ought to thank God for His goodness. You have formed a habit of reacting to adversity by swearing, and probably you will always initially feel like responding in this way. The encouraging thing is that you have found strength to catch yourself before reacting in the usual way. It is not a sin to be tempted; it is not even a sin to almost fall. The sin comes in deliberate wrongdoing. Rejoice at the degree of victory that is yours, and pray that added strength may be given you to "keep you from falling, and to present you faultless." Jude 24.

An Hour With Pierre Bourguet

(Continued from page 23)

of the Christian man. Liberty is too often misunderstood; so many young people take for granted that liberty means license, freedom to indulge in the cravings of destructive passions. To others freedom is tantamount to unconcernedness. But liberty, as the Christian understands it, entails great responsibilities and demands strong inner discipline.

The sun is setting. It is getting darker in the small office of the leader of an evangelical people who, today, are not only looking back to a dramatic past, but turning toward the days ahead with a new vision and a powerful message. The flame of an eternally youthful gospel is not dying out; it will shine with greater brightness and warmth in France in the days to come. [END]